

Professional Baseball to Return to the Wabash Valley?

Community Affairs File

Wabash Valley Focus June 1978

In 1901 Terre Haute was known for two things: it's coal and the Terre Haute Huts. The pride and joy of the Wabash Valley, the Huts were members of the old Triple I League, and produced such great baseball players as Max Carey, Paul "Dizzy" Trout and the unforgettable "Three-Finger" Mordecai Brown.

Sure, the Jacksons and the Seavers are hot stuff today. But to the fans of the old Terre Haute Huts the old time players brought as much excitement as any of the present day superstars.

Many of these hometown boys and some half a dozen others jumped from the Terre Haute minor league team to stardom. Later, in the fifties, aspiring batters, pitchers, and catchers got their break to the big time here in Terre Haute through the Phillies and Huts minor league teams.

Now Terre Haute attorney, Jim Lewis wants to revive the city's days of glory in baseball by establishing a farm club of a major league team here. In the future, for little more than a dollar admission, people of the Wabash Valley could be rooting for a home team once again, if all goes according to the plan. Lewis feels with high-priced talent pulling down contracts for one, two, and three million dollars, the major league clubs might turn to more minor league teams to recruit players. A greater supply might bring salaries down from the stratosphere. Otherwise astronomical salaries might destroy the game.

America's favorite pastime has miraculously endured since the 1880's when a batter got nine balls and five strikes. Teammates heckled a fielder as a sissy if he wore a glove back then. Leagues began in 1884, one of which evolved into the present-

day American League. Astoundingly, the game survived without night games until the late 1920's. With six and seven-day work weeks, a few men could pull themselves away from their jobs to take in a game. Yet attendance totaled nearly 35,000 during the first season of the Terre Haute ball club in 1901. In its first year up at bat, the new team steamrolled its way to the league title and repeated the feat three more times.

One unusual player in particular who razzed-dazzled the fans that year was "Three-Finger" Mordecai Brown, or "Brownie" as he was usually called, who would later go on to compile a 239-130 win-lost lifetime pitching record. Brownie's handicap only broadened his appeal. He lost two fingers at the age of seven in a corn picker on his uncle's farm in Rosedale. He developed a particularly devilish curve ball despite his crippled hand but he never thought of baseball as a career until he emerged from a mine one day to play on the company team. The coach drafted Mordecai on third base and installed him sometimes to pitch relief for an ailing teammate. That day Brownie started his journey to the Hall of Fame.

After skipping around the country on minor league teams for several years, Brown settled with the Chicago Cubs in 1906. "He had control, he could hit a dime." Paul Frisz, local baseball historian, marvelled. In 1908, Brownie was the first major leaguer to pitch four consecutive shutouts. He also wielded a pretty mean stick since he was a switch hitter. Often he would team up with his favorite catcher, Jimmy Archer, who had a crippled arm. Promoters drew extra large crowds when they advertised the unusual pair not unlike a circus sideshow.

Brownie pioneered the way to the big leagues, but other well-known luminaries in the world of baseball originated from Terre Haute. Josh DeVore of Seelyville was a speedy runner and base stealer. "Doc" Ferguson eventually gave up baseball for a bone-setting practice in Florida. Art Nehf, the great Giants relief pitcher, played first at Wiley and then at Rose Poly. Vic Aldridge's claim to fame is the two World Series games he pitched and won in 1925, Paul "Dizzy" Trout was a 20-game winner for the Detroit Tigers in 1943 and went into broadcasting announcing baseball games. Harry Taylor of Seelyville pitched three no-hit games for the Dodgers. In 1942, Bill Butland pitched seven consecutive games for the Red Sox and triumphed over every National League team.

One of the truly all-time greats was Max Carey, another hometown boy, who often held the record for base stealing. At the height of his career, in 1922, he stole 51 bases out of 53 attempts.

But the sport of baseball has a way of

chewing up even the best players and discarding them. Both Taylor and Butland clung on for a few years after injuring their arms but eventually dropped out of the sport and took up other occupations.

Brown fell on hard times after his four-year stint in the major leagues. The Cubs traded him to the minor leagues. In 1919 he returned to Terre Haute to manage the team for two years. Yet Terre Haute's first and foremost baseball star couldn't "manage worth a damn," according to Frisz. Brownie was a doer, not a teacher.

The players come and go, but ball parks are much more durable. The first local ball club played on a field at 19th and Wabash Avenue. Later the diamond was moved to 27th and Wabash. In 1925, the city developed an enviable ball park at what is now Memorial Stadium. The dimensions almost matched those of a major league park. Football and baseball games of local schools dominated the interest of Terre Haute fans.

Excitement for pro baseball was revived after World War Two when the Phillies located in Terre Haute. War-weary citizens sought the carefree entertainment of a ball game. What better way to express patriotism to boot? For nine years the Phillies gave the city its best entertainment value with seats rarely exceeding two bits. Attorney Jim Lewis vividly details the first baseball game he attended. In 1953, seven-year-old James begged, cajoled, pleaded, and otherwise demanded that his uncle take him to a Phillies game. Lewis could barely contain himself as he witnessed the Phillies defeat the Waterloo (Iowa) Whitehawks 6 to 5. With Jim Owens pitching and Harry Anderson on first base, how could we lose?



Harry Taylor



Vic Aldridge



Max Carey

Lewis, now infected with terminal baseball hysteria, tuned in to every broadcast of a game possible. He hung on every word of the radio announcer.

The Phillies drew about 200,000 people each season until enthusiasm waned in the early fifties. Small-town pro baseball was in trouble with a capital T. The Phillies moved to Clearwater, Florida, to be replaced by the Terre Haute Huts, a Detroit Tigers farm club.

General manager Paul Frisz guided the team for two years. But people were staying home as the economy in general slumped. Attendance dwindled to around 700 per night, about 500 less than desirable. A restriction in the deed forbid the sale of beverages which cut deeply into concessions sales. The 1956 bus strike was the straw which broke the camel's back. Unlike today, a great many people depended on buses which ran until midnight. With no buses, many people could not get to the ball park. The Huts folded the same year. ISU inherited the ball park. The floodlights went off. The hot dog vendor went home. There was no joy in Mudville that night for the Mighty Huts had struck out.

After nearly a quarter of a century without a pro ball club, Lewis wants to return Terre Haute to its preeminence in the minor leagues. After all, nine is the perfect number in baseball and only eight teams scattered around Wisconsin and Iowa comprise the Midwest League (the reincarnated Three-I league which folded in 1961).

League rules stipulates a team must be financially stable, which equates to \$25,000 in the bank. Once voted in, the new team can bargain for a highly-prized working agreement with a major league team. With ever increasing salaries, major league teams whittled the number of these agreements down to 36. However, the team usually pays

all or most of the salaries of players and managers of a farm club plus some meager road money. Local owners must put up the cash for maintenance of a park, travel money and other expenses.

Lewis calculates a team here could break even with \$90,000 in sales, or about \$1 a head with an equal amount for concessions. Waterloo, Iowa, a town smaller than Terre Haute, supports a team which made a \$44,000 profit last year. Lewis could swing a deal if he got just 50 two-percent shareholders to subscribe to and finance a team.

But Terre Haute's geographic location poses a hazard to the dream of a pro ball club. The closest city in the Midwest League is 250 miles away. The league would need another Indiana or Illinois town to join as a stepping stone to Terre Haute. A Danville, Illinois team folded, Lafayette vetoed the idea and Kokomo is only mildly interested. And, of course, there is the small matter of a playing field since Memorial Stadium is no longer available. Lewis admits his project is at least two years away.

An old cliché equates America with baseball, hot dogs and apple pie. Apple pies usually come frozen, stiff as wood and tasting about as bad. Foot long hot dogs have shrunk to nine inches. The question is: can minor league baseball survive in a small town?

—Carl Orth

